



Finding the Kingdom of God in Africa

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Shaw, Mark, and Wanjiru M. Gitau. *The Kingdom of God in Africa: A History of African Christianity*. 2nd edition. Carlisle, Cambria, UK: Langham Global Library, 2020. Pp. xii + 368; maps. £19.99 (paperback).

Christine Chemutai CHIRCHIR

Kenya Highlands Evangelical University, Kericho, Kenya
christinechirchir6@gmail.com

Shaw and Gitau introduce the book with an illustration of wrestling to describe how Africans have worked hard to embrace the kingdom of God. Examining the statistics of Christian growth in Africa, one may be tempted to think that the wrestling match has ended and Christianity is triumphant. However, the story is more complex than that and the authors warn that such triumphalism would be out-of-place, as “millions of Africans still struggle with what it means to be both African and Christian” (2), “grappling with the person of Jesus Christ” (1). Continuing with the athletic metaphor, Shaw and Gitau discuss historiographical methods and approaches — “wrestling with history” (5–10). They compare five perspectives from which African Christian history have been examined — The Subjective Side of History, Missionary Historiography, Nationalist Historiography, Ecumenical Historiography, and The Perspective of World Christianity — and commit to follow the latter.

Next, the authors ‘wrestle with the Kingdom’, discussing the various ways that the Kingdom of God can be, and has been, understood. A major contribution of this book is its connecting what we may call ‘kingdomology’ with ecclesiology, exploring the relationship between differing understandings of the Kingdom of God with what the Church has looked like at different times and in different places. Do we understand the Kingdom as “the Providential and Theocratic Rule of God”, “the Redemptive Rule of Christ”, or as “the Promotion of Justice”? How we understand “Kingdom of God” necessarily impacts how we understand the nature of the Church. The book is divided into four parts each covering a different epoch of African history.

Part 1. The Imperial Rule of God: Beginnings to AD 600

During this time period, ecclesial understandings of *Kingdom of God* were

Christine Chemutai Chirchir

Finding the Kingdom of God in Africa

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY: *The Kingdom of God in Africa: A History of African Christianity*, by Mark Shaw and Wanjiru M. Gitau

understandably modeled on understandings of imperial rule by human kings and emperors. This section has three chapters —

2. The kingdom along the Nile: Christianity in Egypt to AD 640;
3. The City of God: Christianity in North Africa;
4. Kings of Glory: Christianity in Ethiopia and Nubia to AD 600

— beginning with a focus on northern Africa, describing Egyptian religion and culture and how these prepared the coming of Christianity. Elements in Egyptian culture and religion were similar to Christianity such as belief in the afterlife and traditional kings which were considered divine. The city of Carthage was home to Italian immigrants, Phoenicians, and native Africans, each with their languages and cultures. In Augustine's concept of the two cities, the pagan and the Christian, Carthage was a symbolic reminder of its inner cultures of darkness and light fighting for survival and supremacy. The story of the church's witness to the kingdom is a story of partial victories and mixed messages. Nubian and Ethiopian understandings of kingdom parallel the Kingship of Christ. The Nubian kingdom was the gateway between colonial coast — Egypt and North Africa had, of course, been colonized by Rome — and the African inland. It acted as a bridge between Rome and the rest of the African continent. The guardians of the gateway were the great kings of Nubia. This is reflected in their art, architecture, and literature where the king is regarded as semi-divine and a servant of the gods. Therefore, after Nubians embraced Christian faith, Nubian art depicts Christ as the royal bridge between the empire of Nubia and the heartland of heaven. This entire section shows how Christianity found a rich grounds in which to plant the seeds of Christianity.

Part 2. The Clash of the Kingdoms: Medieval African Christianity (600–1700)

Next, the authors examine competing kingdoms which offered allegiance to different kings in the following chapters:

5. The Kingdoms of Allah and Mungu — Islam and African Religion in the Middle Ages;
6. Crumbling Kingdoms — Nubian Collapse and Ethiopian Survival;
7. The Kingdoms of Christendom — The European Discovery of Africa, 1500–1700.

In this section, authors recount the coming of the Islamic religion, the presence of the African Religion, and the introduction of the European Christianity into the continent. They introduce the often-neglected histories of Christianity in Nubia and Ethiopia during this time period. Nubian Christianity thrived for a thousand years centuries before the coming of the Euro-American missionaries but then declined. The Ethiopians are descendants of Aksumites

Christine Chemutai Chirchir
Finding the Kingdom of God in Africa
BOOK REVIEW ESSAY: *The Kingdom of God in Africa: A History of African Christianity*, by Mark Shaw and Wanjiru M. Gitau

who are Semitic in culture and language, though their culture is authentically African and indigenous even though other Semites have Asian cultures.

Shaw and Gitau thus note that “Africa is a continent with a triple heritage. For thousands of years, she has been the meeting ground of Western, indigenous, and Semitic cultures. This triple heritage is particularly evident in the area of religion. Islam, Christianity, and African traditional religion are all deeply rooted in the African past” (83). But the implied equations that

Western = Christian, indigenous = ATR, and Semitic = Islamic

is overly facile and, of course, wrong. The Copts were the indigenous Egyptians. They are African, and neither Semitic nor western. The Nubians were Nilotic. The Ethiopians were mostly Semitic and Cushitic, depending on the ethnic group. But within the story of early Christianity, Egyptian (Coptic), Nubian, and Ethiopian Christianity represent Eastern cultures, not Western cultures. There is also a strong argument that Egyptian-Coptic, Nubian, and Ethiopian/Eritrean forms of Christianity are themselves an African traditional religion, with an older history than some ATRs are able to boast.

Thus there are *two separate* senses in which we can speak of Africa having a “triple heritage.” First, culturally, Africa has been the meeting place between Western (Greek, Roman/Latin, and eastern European) cultures, indigenous African cultures (e.g. Coptic, Nilotic, Cushitic, Bantu) which includes some indigenous semitic cultures (e.g., Aksumite), and imported Arabic semitic culture (as well as imported Jewish culture, which at times has been especially important in Egypt and in what is now Ethiopia and Eritrea). Second, religiously, Africa has been the meeting place between non-Judeo-Christian traditional religions, Christianity, and Islam (though this leaves out the importance of Judaism in North Africa, Egypt, and Ethiopia + Eritrea). For clarity of narrative, Shaw and Gitau have perhaps oversimplified the picture. But they clearly demonstrate that throughout this period at times the Church struggled to survive, at times it seemed to die, and yet it has risen from the ashes and continued to grow.

Part 3. The Reign of Christ: African Christianity in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries

Now well into the modern period, the Church continued to wrestle with what it means for Christ to reign. The authors first explore the Christian struggle against (or at times acquiescence to) the evils of slavery, and then examine Christian history in three different regions of Africa through the lens of *kingdom*.

8. The Liberating Kingdom — The Crusade Against the Slave Trade;

Christine Chemutai Chirchir

Finding the Kingdom of God in Africa

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY: *The Kingdom of God in Africa: A History of African Christianity*, by Mark Shaw and Wanjiru M. Gitau

9. Kingdom and Community in West Africa;
10. A Kingdom Divided — South African Christianity;
11. The Violent Kingdom — East African Christianity.

After the eighth chapter's narration of the Church's struggle against the slave trade, chapter 9 recounts the settlement of freed slaves in Sierra Leon to begin an experiment in Christian community in Africa. They named the city Freetown, in hope that it would be a community where the liberating power of the gospel to break the chains of sin and slavery would be demonstrated. Chapter 10 opens with the story of the "scattering of kingdoms" in flight from the violent Zulu expansion and continues with a narrative of the spread of Christianity, "scattering its gospel as widely as Shaka had scattered his spears" (184). The story of the gradual conversion of Moshoeshoe reminds us "that the clash of kingdoms during the early decades of the nineteenth century involved more than guns and spears" as "the arrival of the gospel of the kingdom in various forms represented another kind of kingdom clash between traditional concepts of kingship and the new concepts of Christendom and Christ's rule in one's heart" (184).

The authors then investigate South African Christianity which was divided by (supposed) racial differences. In the nineteenth century, South Africa experienced Christian revitalization movements in three contexts. Just as Shaka constructed the Zulu into a new nation, the Afrikaners developed into a distinct people, with the Afrikaner identity explicitly tied to the vision of the kingdom "as a Reformed Theocracy" (186). Opposed to the Afrikaner theocracy were vast numbers of evangelical missionaries who "understood the kingdom as the rule of Christ in hearts rather than rule of the elect on earth" (191), especially exemplified by the teaching and practice of revivalist Andrew Murray. The third context envisioned "the Kingdom as Justice," in which prophets of social culture fought against societal injustices, especially oppression based on racial theories just as apartheid.

More trouble was experienced within the Eastern Africa region. The authors characterize East African Christianity as violent during this time because "Christians were killed and engaged in killing to promote the faith" (211). Chapter 11 "seeks to tell the story of an East African Christianity that came in meekness and martyrdom only to end in militancy" (211), focusing on the story in what are now Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda. In Ethiopia, the European "kingdoms of Christendom represented by a militant Italy bent on colonial expansion almost destroyed a newly reunited" — and theocratically Christian — "Ethiopia." Ethiopia's successful resistance and victory enhanced "the legend of Ethiopianism" (216), ultimately inspiring many 'Ethiopian' AIC movements across Africa.

Christine Chemutai Chirchir
Finding the Kingdom of God in Africa
BOOK REVIEW ESSAY: *The Kingdom of God in Africa: A History of African Christianity*, by Mark Shaw and Wanjiru M. Gitau

Part 4. The Kingdom on Earth: African Christianity in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries

This section recounts the influence of colonialism and the impact of the missionary movement in Africa.

12. Ambassadors of the Kingdom — The Missionary Factor in Colonial Africa;
13. Cities of Zion — Independent Christian Movements before 1960;
14. Christianity in Post-Independence Africa.

Ambassadors of the Kingdom investigates the successful work of the missionaries in colonial Africa. Where there was colonial control, there the church grew and expanded including establishment of social institutions such as schools and hospitals. Colonial protection acted like a magic wand in bring about conversions even though the presence of colonial power did not guarantee church growth. Where missionaries were perceived as helpful mediators between the indigenous people and a potentially beneficial foreign power, local response to missionary message was generally favorable. Political independence brought with it a challenge in the church movement also. This caused the rise of African Initiated (independent) churches. Christians decided to break away from the mainstream churches run by the missionaries. The final chapter tries to present lessons and reflections from the struggling African Christianity. Shaw and Gitau conclude by pointing out that the story of the African striving for genuine kingdom identity has universal significance.

Evaluation

Shaw and Gitau have given an excellent chronological presentation of the history of Christianity in Africa. While the first section of the book presents the life of African culture before the coming of Christianity, the entire book details the challenges and successes that Christianity has experienced as it has tried to permeate culture. The historical narrative given in the book is first rate and clearly summarizes major historical periods in detail. Every chapter presents a powerful presentation of the church as it wrestled with penetrating and changing the culture.

The book opens with the Ogbu Kalu's idea that the African story of Christianity focuses on the Church's struggle to bring Christianity to the poor. That in itself raises questions (poor in what? in spirit? in material wealth? in knowledge?) in the mind of the reader. However, the writers immediately explain that history is written from one of two perspectives, either objectively or subjectively. Similarly, reading also can be objective or subjective. Thus understandings about who "the poor" are will impact the answer to the question

Christine Chemutai Chirchir

Finding the Kingdom of God in Africa

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY: *The Kingdom of God in Africa: A History of African Christianity*, by Mark Shaw and Wanjiru M. Gitau

of how “the poor” responded to the gift of “the gospel of the kingdom” (4). Readers from a developed nation will probably have a different understanding than readers from a developing nation.

The authors offer a concise chronological presentation of the history of Christianity in Africa right from the inception of the Christianity in Africa. Though they do not sound optimistic that the Christian message will have lasting impact in the life of the African Church, they are not pessimistic but are warning against triumphalism. How can Christianity in any place or culture remain authentic? Throughout history, they note, “African Christians have discovered that reflecting the rule of Christ and his kingdom is often an elusive ideal never perfectly achieved by any of the real-world institutions that bear Christ’s name” (17). This leads us to ask, ‘for how long will African Christians wrestle with Christianity, if it is an elusive thing?’ This takes us back to the introduction where the writers indicate that Africans were already religious people and the concepts found in the Christian message are related in some ways to the concepts found in the African traditional religion. This has made it possible for the Christian message to find a place in the life of the African person. The rich legacy of the African religious heritage is significant in shaping the understanding of African Christianity. The entire book is intent on showing the flow of the history of Christianity within the African Continent and how the African church has struggled to be effective witness to the one she worships. In every period in the history of the church, she has had to work hard to maintain balance and stay true to her God.

The Kingdom of God in Africa is beautifully written and throughout the work, the authors have presented clear summaries of people, places, and events. In summary, this contribution to the literature on African Christianity is a plus. The rich legacy of African Christian history has been limited to a few sources for so long time. My only wish for them is that as historians of African literature, to present a more discrete elaboration of the term ‘poor’, which is a theme of the book, and more fully address the weaknesses and strengths that are found in understanding the African Traditional religion in relation to Christianity. I find that there is much that the writers mention at the introductory section from the African perspective that should have been beneficial to the Christian religion, as they were part of the life of the African and also part of the Christian message. E.g., the idea as life after death as demonstrated in the Egyptian religion or the Divine King as seen through the life of Pharaoh. I believe if that if understood well, such may provide a link between the Christian religion and the African man. This is because the introductory points are very crucial in pointing out the direction of flow of history in the African context. If done well, this might give more room for an authentic Christianity to flourish in Africa. While the writers have pointed out that historiography can be done from an objective or

Christine Chemutai Chirchir
Finding the Kingdom of God in Africa
BOOK REVIEW ESSAY: *The Kingdom of God in Africa: A History of African Christianity*, by Mark Shaw and Wanjiru M. Gitau

subjective point of view, I believe they have presented an example of balanced historiography in *The Kingdom of God*. The Church in Africa is still wrestling with rooting the message of salvation, with adhering to the Kingdom of God.

Authentic Christianity may not be as elusive as the writers have suggested, but has found key points of entrance into African cultures and is changing cultures throughout history from the Nile Delta, down the Nile River and on to Southern Africa, and across the continent from West Africa to East Africa. With all the challenges that Christianity experienced and still experiences, it has survived for centuries in Africa. Different generations of Christians have struggled to maintain the Christian faith, as the writers have indicated in their historical narrative. The same spirit continues to permeate the African continent. With the few trivial cautions as mentioned above, I am very excited about this book with the contribution that it makes to the history of Christianity in Africa. Both its subject matter and organization serve to make this text a 'must read' for students and non-students alike. The authors are excellent historians and I recommend this work unreservedly. It is time for the African student and pastor to commit to understanding the development of the history of Christianity — both how much has been done and how much still needs to be done. As the Sotho king Moshoeshe realized in the early 1800s, "the message about heavenly kingdoms [has] enormous earthly implications" (184). There is a lot that is still necessary and that is waiting to be done for the kingdom of God to be sufficiently deeply rooted within the African Christian context.